

Judgments of relationship satisfaction: inter- and intraindividual comparison strategies as a function of questionnaire structure

Schwarz, Norbert; Scheuring, Bettina

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**Judgments of relationship satisfaction:
Inter- and intraindividual comparisons as a
function of questionnaire structure**

NORBERT SCHWARZ

*Zentrum für Umfragen
Methoden und Analysen
ZUMA
Mannheim, FRG*

and

BETTINA SCHEURING

*Zentrum für Verhaltensmedizin und Psychosomatik
Klinik Berlin
Berlin, FRG*

Abstract

Two experiments demonstrate that individuals use an interindividual comparison strategy to evaluate a specific life-domain if their attention is drawn to only one aspect of that domain, that has either positive or negative evaluative implications. If their attention is drawn to two aspects with opposite implications, however, an intra-individual strategy, based on the comparison of both aspects, is preferred. Whether one or two aspects bearing on a specific domain are salient is, among other conditions, a function of the number of aspects assessed in a questionnaire. Theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Comparison processes have long been recognized to be at the heart of satisfaction judgments. From early philosophical considerations of the nature of contentment and happiness (for a review see Tatarkiewicz, 1976) to recent empirical investigations (for reviews see Diener, 1984; Strack, Argyle and Schwarz, in press), theoreticians have

Addressee for correspondence: Dr Norbert Schwarz, ZUMA, P.O. Box 12 21 55, D-6800 Mannheim, W. Germany

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agreed that our subjective evaluation of our objective conditions of living is a function of the standard to which we choose to compare them. Less agreement, however, has been reached about the type of comparison standard that is employed in making satisfaction judgments.

Theoretically, a number of different comparison strategies may be used to evaluate one's living conditions. For example, we may choose an interindividual comparison strategy, comparing our own living conditions with those of others (e.g. Carp and Carp, 1982; Dermer, Cohen, Jacobsen and Anderson, 1979; Runciman, 1966; Strack, Schwarz, Chassein, Kern and Wagner, 1988), or an intraindividual comparison strategy, comparing our current situation with our previous living conditions (e.g. Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Elder, 1974; Parducci, 1984; Strack, Schwarz and Gschneidinger, 1985). Alternatively, we may evaluate our living conditions by comparing their positive and negative features, that is, by using an intraindividual comparison strategy within the same time frame. Moreover, we may compare our current situation to our expectations, using our aspiration level as a standard of comparison (e.g. Campbell, 1981; Michalos, 1985). None of these comparison strategies is *a priori* more plausible than the other, although they accentuate different aspects of one's living conditions.

Many theoreticians seem to assume that the comparison standard used by a given person is relatively stable, and reflects variables that may be expected to change only slowly over time, such as the person's reference group (e.g. Hyman and Singer, 1968; Runciman, 1966), previous experiences (e.g. Parducci, 1984), or adaptation level (e.g. Brickman and Campbell, 1971). In contrast to this implicit assumption, experimental research indicates that the choice of comparison standards, and their specific value at a given point in time, is a function of what happens to come to mind at the time of judgment. For example, individuals were found to evaluate their life more positively when they were induced to think of negative rather than positive events in their *own* past (e.g. Strack *et al.*, 1985, Experiment 1), or when they were exposed to information about negative rather than positive living conditions of *others* (e.g. Dermer *et al.*, 1979; Strack *et al.*, 1988). Note, that these findings suggest that the choice of one's own past, or of the situation of others, as a standard of comparison, as well as the specific value of the respective standard used, is determined by the type of information that is salient at the time of judgment.

Accordingly, a comprehensive judgment model of subjective well-being, proposed by Schwarz and Strack (1985; in press; Schwarz, 1987), hypothesizes that the choice of comparison strategies is determined by the cognitive accessibility of relevant comparison information. As in other areas of judgment (see Bodenhausen and Wyer, 1987; Higgins, in press, for reviews), whatever happens to come to mind, and is applicable to the judgmental task, is likely to be used. This hypothesis has a number of important methodological implications and suggests that the choice of comparison strategies, as well as the value of a particular comparison standard used as part of this strategy, may be determined by the content and structure of the specific research instrument that is employed in a study. These methodological implications are the key concern of the present paper.

THE IMPACT OF QUESTION CONTENT AND QUESTION FORM

In a research situation, the cognitive accessibility of comparison information is in part a function of the content and form of the questions asked. Questions designed to

this aspect with the situation of others. If the questions direct respondents' attention to positive *and* negative aspects of their own situation, however, respondents may evaluate their situation by comparing its positive and negative features intraindividually. Thus, whether the preceding questions increase the accessibility of only one aspect, or of several aspects with different evaluative implications, may determine whether an inter- or an intraindividual comparison strategy is used. Finally, the set of *response alternatives* provided to respondents may influence their own assessment of their objective situation, as well as their inferences about the situation of others. While the former may determine the outcome of comparative judgments by eliciting different estimates regarding one's own objective living conditions, the latter may determine the outcome of comparisons by suggesting different estimates of the 'usual' conditions. Thus, the set of response alternatives may influence comparative judgments under inter- as well as intraindividual comparison strategies but with different implications, as described below.

To test these hypotheses, two studies were conducted in which subjects reported their satisfaction with their current intimate relationship. In Experiment 1, their attention was directed to only one aspect of their sexual behaviour in that relationship, which had either positive or negative evaluative implications. In Experiment 2, their attention was directed to a positive as well as to a negative aspect. The impact of sexual comparison information on judgments of relationship satisfaction was considered a particularly interesting testing ground for the present hypotheses because lay theories hold that comparison information plays a minor role in this domain, whereas experimental research suggests the opposite (e.g. Zillman, 1984; Zillman and Bryant, 1988).

EXPERIMENT 1: ASSESSING ONE BEHAVIOUR

In the first study, male college students who dated a steady partner, were asked to report how frequently they masturbate or how frequently they have sexual intercourse. Based on previous research (Simon, 1973; Giese and Schmidt, 1968), it was assumed that a high frequency of sexual intercourse would have positive implications for the evaluation of the relationship, whereas a high frequency of masturbation would have negative implications.

To report the frequency of each behaviour, respondents were given a set of response alternatives that ranged either from 'more than once a day' to 'less than once a week' (*high frequency range*), or from 'more than once a week' to 'never' (*low frequency range*). It was assumed that respondents would report a higher frequency of intercourse or masturbation, respectively, when given the higher rather than the lower frequency response alternatives. This finding would reflect the previously documented use of the response alternatives as a salient frame of reference in estimating behavioural frequencies (see Schwarz, *in press*; Schwarz and Hippler, 1987 for reviews).

Moreover, if respondents use their own location on the scale to determine their location in the distribution, the high frequency response alternatives should suggest to them that they engage in the respective behaviour *less* frequently than others. In contrast, the low frequency response alternatives should suggest to them that they engage in the respective behaviour *more* frequently than others. Accordingly, respondents who are asked to report how often they masturbate are hypothesized to evaluate their relationship more positively after providing their report on the high

assess positive or negative aspects of the respondent's living conditions are likely to increase the cognitive accessibility of these aspects and may therefore influence subsequent satisfaction judgments. While researchers are often aware of the potential impact of the *content* of a question, a more subtle influence due to question *form* is usually overlooked. Specifically, respondents are often asked to report on their living conditions by checking one alternative from a list of response alternatives provided to them. While researchers assume that the selected alternative informs them about the respondent's situation, they usually overlook that the response alternatives may also serve as a source of information for the respondent (see Schwarz, in press; Schwarz and Hippler, 1987 for reviews).

Assume, for example, that respondents in a leisure time study are asked to report how many hours of TV they watch on a typical day. Some respondents are asked to provide this report on a scale ranging, in half hour steps, from 'up to ½ hour' to 'more than 2½ hours' per day, whereas other respondents receive a scale that ranges from 'up to 2½ hours' to 'more than 4½ hours'. Previous research (Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch and Strack, 1985) indicated that respondents assume that the range of the response alternatives reflects the researcher's knowledge of the distribution of the behaviour in the population. Specifically, they assume that the 'usual' or 'average' behaviour is reflected in values in the middle range of the scale and that the extremes of the scale reflect the extremes of the distribution. This assumption affects their own behavioural reports as well as subsequent comparative judgments.

If a behavioural report is difficult to provide on the basis of relevant episodic information, as is usually the case for mundane behaviours that are not well represented in memory (*cf.* Bradburn, Rips and Shevell, 1987; Schwarz in press; Strube, 1987), respondents use the range of the response alternatives as a salient frame of reference to compute an estimate. Accordingly, they provide higher estimates when presented a high rather than a low frequency set of response alternatives. For example, 37.5 per cent of a quota sample of German adults who were given the high frequency response scale described above reported watching TV for 2½ h or more, while only 16.2 per cent of the respondents who were given the low frequency response scale reported doing so (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985).

In addition, respondents may use the information extracted from the scale to form comparative judgments. If one assumes that the range of the response alternatives reflects the distribution of the behaviour in the population, checking one of the response alternatives is equivalent to determining one's own location in the distribution. For example, German respondents who were asked to report their TV consumption on the low frequency scale described above were likely to check values in the upper range of that scale. This suggested to them that they watch *more* TV than 'usual'. Respondents who received the high frequency scale, on the other hand, were likely to check values in the lower range of that scale, suggesting to them that they watch *less* TV than 'usual'. In line with this reasoning, the former respondents evaluated TV to be more important in their own life (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985, Experiment 1), and reported lower satisfaction with the variety of things they do in their leisure time (Experiment 2), than the latter.

In summary, questions about respondents' objective circumstances of life may influence subsequent satisfaction judgments in various ways. First, the *content* of the questions may determine which aspects of the respondent's life are highly accessible. Second, if the questions direct respondents' attention to only *one* (positive or negative) aspect, we assume that respondents will compare their own situation with regard to

rather than the low frequency response scale. In contrast, respondents who are asked to report how frequently they have intercourse are hypothesized to evaluate their relationship more positively after providing their report on the low rather than the high frequency scale.

Method

Fifty-one male college students (mean age = 22.8 years) at a West German university, all of whom had previously reported dating a steady partner, participated in a study on relationship satisfaction. Respondents were randomly assigned to conditions and anonymously answered a self-administered questionnaire, which they returned in a sealed envelope.

Embedded in a number of filler questions, half of the respondents were asked how frequently they have sexual intercourse with their partner, while the other half reported their frequency of masturbation. To provide these reports, respondents were given one of the two scales shown in Figure 1, resulting in a 2(masturbation versus intercourse) \times 2(high versus low frequency scale)-factorial between subjects design.

Low frequency range	High frequency range
() several times a week	() several times a day
() once a week	() once a day
() once every two weeks	() 3 to 4 times a week
() once a month	() twice a week
() less than once a month	() once a week
() never	() less than once a week

Figure 1 Response alternatives

Subsequently, respondents were asked, 'How satisfied are you with your current relationship with your partner?' (1 = very dissatisfied, 11 = very satisfied). Finally, respondents estimated the average frequency of intercourse (or masturbation, respectively) among college students who date a steady partner, in an open response format.

After completion of the experiment, respondents were carefully debriefed.

Results

Behavioural reports

For reasons of comparability across the two scales, respondents' behavioural reports were coded to reflect frequency estimates of once a week or more, or of less than once a week. These proportions were analysed by a procedure suggested by Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985). As shown in the top row of Table 1, a higher percentage of respondents reported having intercourse or masturbating at least once a week when given the high than when given the low frequency response alternatives ($z = 2.47$ and 1.56 , $p < 0.01$ and 0.05 , one-tailed, for the intercourse and masturbation reports, respectively). This finding indicates that respondents used the range of the response alternatives as a frame of reference in estimating their own behaviour, as shown in previous studies (e.g. Schwartz *et al.*, 1985; Schwarz and Bienias, in press).

Table 1 Behavioural reports, assumed typical behaviour and relationship satisfaction as a function of reported behaviour and scale range

	Reported behaviour			
	Intercourse		Masturbation	
	Frequency range of response scale			
	High	Low	High	Low
N	13	13	13	12
Behavioural reports*	76.9% (10)	38.5% (5)	69.2% (9)	41.7% (5)
Estimated 'typical' frequency per month†	10.6	7.8	9.1	7.1
Relationship satisfaction‡	8.6	8.6	9.8	7.3

*Given is the percentage of respondents who reported a frequency of at least once a week (N given in parentheses)

†Given is respondents' estimate of the monthly intercourse or masturbation frequency of a 'typical' college student

‡11 = high satisfaction

Estimates of others' behaviour

The second row of Table 1 shows respondents' estimates of the behaviour of a 'typical' college student, that were assessed in an open response format at the end of the questionnaire. As expected, respondents estimated a higher rate of intercourse or masturbation to be 'typical' when they had reported their own behaviour on a high rather than a low frequency response scale, $F(1,42) = 14.18$, $p < 0.001$; all other $F < 1$. Thus, respondents did extract information about the presumably typical behaviour from the range of the scale, again replicating our previous findings.

Relationship satisfaction

Finally, the last row of Table 1 shows respondents' reported relationship satisfaction. Analysis of variance indicates a marginally reliable interaction of both experimental variables, $F(1,43) = 2.95$, $p < 0.10$, and no main effects.

Specifically, respondents who reported their masturbation frequency on the high frequency scale, suggesting to them that they masturbate *less* frequently than 'usual', evaluated their relationship more favourably than respondents who reported their masturbation behaviour on the low frequency scale, suggesting to them that they masturbate *more* frequently than 'usual', $F(1,43) = 5.3$, $p < 0.03$, for the simple main effect. The frequency range of the intercourse question, on the other hand, did not affect respondents' judgments, $F < 1$.

Discussion

In summary, respondents estimated their own frequency of masturbation or intercourse, as well as the average frequency of a typical college student, to be higher when

they reported their own behaviour on a response scale that provided high rather than low frequency response alternatives. Moreover, respondents who reported their masturbation behaviour apparently used the comparison information provided by the scale in evaluating their satisfaction with their current relationship, according to an interindividual comparison strategy. These findings replicate previous results (Schwarz *et al.*, 1985; Schwarz and Bienias, in press) bearing on the informative functions of response alternatives.

The frequency range of the intercourse question, on the other hand, did not affect respondents' evaluation. This asymmetry probably reflects that the evaluative implications of intercourse frequency are more ambiguous than the evaluative implications of masturbation frequency. While the experiences brought to mind by the intercourse question may be pleasant or problematic, independent of their sheer frequency, a high frequency of masturbation is likely to suggest that something is 'missing' in the relationship, reflecting the compensatory nature of masturbation that is prevalent in naive theories of sexual behaviour (Simon, 1973).

Regarding the choice of comparison strategies, we note that respondents who reported how frequently they masturbate engaged in *interindividual* comparisons to evaluate their sexual relationship when only *one* behaviour was assessed.

EXPERIMENT 2: ASSESSING TWO BEHAVIOURS

In the second study, respondents reported *both* their frequency of masturbation and their frequency of intercourse, using either a high or a low frequency response scale. These manipulations resulted in a 2 (high versus low frequency masturbation scale) \times 2 (high versus low frequency intercourse scale) — factorial design.

If respondents engage in *interindividual* comparisons, as was the case when only one behaviour was assessed, the results should mirror the previous findings. That is, respondents should report lower satisfaction when the low frequency response scale suggests to them that they masturbate more often than others. The frequency range of the intercourse question, on the other hand, may show no effect.

We hypothesized, however, that respondents may prefer an *intraindividual* comparison strategy if two aspects with opposite evaluative implications are salient. Specifically, they may compare their own frequency of intercourse with their own frequency of masturbation to evaluate their sexual relationship. Note in this regard, that the range of the response alternatives did not only affect respondents' assumptions about the behaviour of others but also their estimates of their own behavioural frequencies. Accordingly, an intraindividual comparison strategy should result in the most favourable evaluation of the relationship when the high frequency intercourse scale induces respondents to estimate a high frequency of intercourse, while the low frequency masturbation scale leads them to estimate a low frequency of masturbation. When these conditions are reversed — that is, when a low frequency intercourse scale elicits estimates of low intercourse frequency, while a high frequency masturbation scale elicits estimates of high masturbation frequency — respondents should report the lowest satisfaction with their relationship. The remaining conditions should result in similar frequency estimates for intercourse and masturbation, and should therefore also result in judgments of intermediate satisfaction.

Method

Sixty-four college students (mean age = 22.7 years) at a West German university, who had previously reported dating a steady partner, participated in this study and were randomly assigned to conditions. The procedures used, as well as the wording of the questions, were identical to Experiment 1, except that respondents in the present study were asked to report their frequency of intercourse as well as their frequency of masturbation, following a 2(intercourse frequency reported on a high versus low frequency scale) \times 2(masturbation frequency reported on a high versus low frequency scale) — factorial between subjects design.

As an additional dependent variable, respondents were asked how interested they are in sexual contacts with a partner other than their current girl-friend (1 = not interested at all, 11 = very interested). After completion of the experiment, respondents were carefully debriefed.

Results

Behavioural reports

As in Experiment 1, a higher percentage of respondents reported masturbating (73.5 per cent) or having intercourse (75.3 per cent) at least once a week when given a high, than when given a low frequency response scale (45.8 per cent and 46.2 per cent, $z = 1.66$ and 1.77 , $p < 0.05$ and 0.04 , one-tailed, for masturbation and intercourse frequency reports, respectively).

Estimates of others' behaviour

In addition, respondents estimated the frequency with which a typical college student has intercourse to be higher when they reported their own behaviour on the high ($M = 8.9$ times per month) rather than the low ($M = 5.6$ times per month) frequency intercourse scale, $F(1,47) = 9.57$, $p < 0.004$. Similarly, they estimated the typical frequency of masturbation to be higher when presented the high ($M = 7.0$ times per month) rather than the low ($M = 4.8$) masturbation frequency scale, $F(1,47) = 3.99$, $p < 0.06$. No other effects emerged.

Relationship satisfaction

Table 2 shows respondents' reported satisfaction with their current relationship and their reported interest in sexual contacts with other partners.

Table 2. Relationship satisfaction as a function of scale range

	Frequency range of masturbation scale			
	High		Low	
	Frequency range of intercourse scale			
	High	Low	High	Low
Relationship satisfaction	8.8	7.3	8.9	8.4
Interest in other partners	5.3	7.1	4.8	5.9

11 = 'very satisfied', or 'very interested', respectively. $N = 16$ per cell.

As predicted by the intraindividual comparison hypothesis, respondents reported the highest relationship satisfaction ($M = 8.9$), and the lowest interest in other partners ($M = 4.8$), when the combination of the low frequency masturbation scale and the high frequency intercourse scale elicited estimates of low masturbation but high intercourse frequency. Respondents who reported their behaviour on the reversed combination of scales, eliciting estimates of high masturbation but low intercourse frequency, reported the lowest satisfaction ($M = 7.3$) and the highest interest in other partners ($M = 7.1$). $t(58) = 2.17$ and 2.08 , $p < 0.05$ for planned comparisons between both groups. The remaining conditions fell in between these extremes, as shown in Table 2.

Discussion

Experiment 2 replicates the findings of Experiment 1 with regard to respondents' behavioural reports as well as their estimates of the behaviour of a 'typical' college student. In contrast to Experiment 1, however, respondents did not use the interindividual comparison information provided by the response alternatives when they evaluated their own relationship. Had they done so, they should have reported higher satisfaction when the low frequency masturbation scale suggested to them that they masturbate less frequently than 'typical'. Such a main effect was not obtained.

The data are also incompatible with the assumption that respondents may have engaged in interindividual comparisons with respect to *both* behaviours. If so, they should have reported the highest relationship satisfaction when the high frequency masturbation scale suggested that they masturbate less frequently than typical, while the low frequency intercourse scale suggested that they have intercourse more frequently than others. In contrast, they reported the lowest relationship satisfaction, and the highest interest in other partners, under this condition.

Rather, the results suggest that respondents used an *intraindividual* comparison strategy and compared their own frequency of masturbation with their own frequency of intercourse. Accordingly, they reported the lowest satisfaction, and the highest interest in other partners, when the combination of response scales elicited estimates of high masturbation frequency but low intercourse frequency. Conversely, they reported the highest satisfaction, and the lowest interest in other partners, when the scales elicited estimates of low masturbation but high intercourse frequency.

CONCLUSIONS

In combination, the present studies suggest that the choice of comparison strategies is determined by the information that is most accessible at the time of judgment. When only one behaviour was assessed, respondents used the range of the response alternatives to infer an *interindividual* comparison standard. Under these conditions, the interindividual comparison information provided by the scale was the most salient standard available. However, when several behaviours with opposite evaluative implications were assessed, respondents were more likely to compare the implications of these behaviours *intraindividually*. Similarly, intraindividual comparisons across time may be expected if respondents' attention is drawn to their previous behaviour.

Accordingly, the choice of an inter- or intraindividual comparison strategy is determined, in part, by the number of relevant behaviours that researchers choose to assess, thus increasing their temporary cognitive accessibility. If only one behaviour relevant

to the judgment is assessed, respondents are likely to engage in interindividual comparisons. If two relevant behaviours with different evaluative implications are assessed, however, respondents are likely to engage in intraindividual comparisons. In both cases, the concrete value of the standard of comparison used by respondents is a function of the frequency range of the response alternatives provided to them. Specifically, respondents use the information provided by the frequency range of the response alternatives to estimate the frequency of their own behaviour, and to infer the 'average' or 'usual' behavioural frequency, as has been shown across a wide range of different behaviours (see Schwarz, 1988, in press; Schwarz and Hippler, 1987).

In summary, then, we find that the nature of the judgmental process is determined to a considerable degree by the structure of the questionnaire and by subtle aspects of question form — even under conditions where the judgment is important and involving, and could be based on extensive personal experience. If we want to avoid misinterpretations of method effects as substantive effects (see Hippler and Schwarz, 1987, Strack and Martin, 1987 for reviews of related findings), we will need to learn more about the impact of our research instruments on respondents' judgments and reports.

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans deux expériences on trouve que les individus adoptent une stratégie de comparaison interindividuelle pour évaluer un domaine spécifique de vie lorsque leur attention est attirée uniquement vers un aspect de ce domaine qui a des implications évaluatives positives ou négatives. Cependant, lorsque leur attention est attirée vers deux aspects avec des implications opposées, les individus préfèrent plutôt une stratégie intraindividuelle, basée sur la comparaison des deux aspects. Si un ou deux aspects liés à ce domaine spécifique sont saillants dépend entre autres du nombre d'aspects examinés dans le questionnaire. Les implications théoriques et méthodologiques sont discutées.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Einfluß der Fragebogenstruktur auf die Wahl von Vergleichsstrategien wird untersucht. Dabei wird angenommen, daß die Wahl eines Vergleichsstandards sowie die Nutzung einer intra- oder interindividuellen Vergleichsstrategie durch die kognitive Verfügbarkeit relevanter Information zum Urteilszeitpunkt bestimmt wird. Konsistent damit zeigen zwei Experimente, daß Personen zur Bewertung eines spezifischen Lebensbereiches eine interindividuelle Vergleichsstrategie heranziehen, wenn sich nur ein Aspekt dieses Lebensbereiches im Fokus ihrer Aufmerksamkeit befindet. Befinden sich zwei Aspekte mit unterschiedlichen evaluativen Implikationen im Fokus der Aufmerksamkeit, wird ein intraindividueller Vergleich der Implikationen dieser augenfälligen Aspekte vorgezogen. Wieviele Aspekte eines Lebensbereiches zum Zeitpunkt der Urteilsbildung kognitiv leicht verfügbar sind, ist unter anderem eine Funktion der Anzahl und Anordnung relevanter Fragen im Fragebogen. Theoretische und methodologische Implikationen werden diskutiert.

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